

MARIKO MORI



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Detail from *PURE LAND*, 1996–98, from *niimata*, 1996–98, glass with photo interlayer, five panels, each 120 x 48 in. (304.8 x 121.9 cm), 120 x 240 in. (304.8 x 609.6 cm) overall, courtesy Deitch Projects, New York

MARIKO MORI

Issues of tradition and identity have been—and continue to be—addressed by artists worldwide in the 1990s, with concerns ranging from sexual preference and concepts of gender to issues of ethnic and racial identity. *Contemporary Projects: Mariko Mori* highlights *Nirvana*, a recent video installation by Mori, a young Japanese artist whose work in general—and *Nirvana* in particular—explores the importance of tradition in contemporary Japanese society while questioning and even subverting its authority. In addition, Mori's work addresses—in the artist's own words—the "instability of identity"¹ and the "exchange between reality and fantasy."² *Nirvana* comprises four billboard-sized, digitally composed photographs encased in glass, a 3-D video, and a lotus-shaped acrylic sculpture titled *Enlightenment Capsule*. Like all of Mori's work, it includes images of the artist and incorporates aspects of performance, fashion design, and technology as well as more traditional sculptural and photographic elements.

Born in Tokyo in 1967, Mori graduated from a traditional, highly structured girls' high school there, which required uniforms with prescribed skirt length and fixed hairstyles. After high school she studied design at Tokyo's Bunka Fashion College and worked part-time as a fashion model, which she originally considered a form of personal creativity. She soon came to realize, however, that a "model is actually just a doll that changes clothes. Modeling [did] not enable me to freely express myself."³ Looking for other ways to achieve this goal, Mori began to mastermind—as producer, director, set and costume designer, and star—tableaux in which she wore clothing of her own design, often with highly sculptural components. She then had these tableaux photographed by others, a strategy that became the basis of her ongoing work. Having gone to London in 1988 to study, first at the Byam Shaw School of Art and subsequently at the Chelsea College of Art, in 1992 Mori moved to New York City to enter the year-long Independent Study Program at the Whitney Museum of American Art. She currently maintains two studios, one in New York and one in Tokyo.

Already in her earliest mature work Mori presented herself in huge photographs as a playful cyborg—half alluring girl, half mechanical doll—cast in roles simultaneously up-to-the-minute and steeped in Japanese cultural history. In *Warrior* (1994), set in a video arcade, Mori appears both as stereotypical superhero and as the eponymous Japanese warrior. In her *Tea Ceremony* images of the same year she is a traditional "office lady" transformed into a bionic waitress standing outside a reflective glass office tower, elegantly yet eerily proffering green tea to Japanese businessmen who studiously ignore her offer. Mori similarly presents herself as a seductive yet distant—even impenetrable—sex kitten in *Love Hotel* (1994), dressed in a typical Japanese school uniform, now augmented with silver metallic headgear, bodystocking, and shoes. It has been suggested that with works such as these Mori "created a visual *mappō*, the Buddhist word for a dark period of moral decline before the arrival of the future Buddha."⁴

This appearance of moral decline is brought out most forcefully in works like Mori's 1996 video *Miko no inori* (*The shaman-girl's prayer*) and a related set of video stills, *Mirage* (1997). Shot in the cold, glittering, ultra-high-tech setting of Osaka's Kansai International Airport, the video and *Mirage* show Mori-as-cyborg, with silver clothing, hair, and fingernails, and riveting ice-blue eyes, caressing a crystal ball in a highly charged manner.

Nirvana (1996–98) reflects a shift in Mori's work toward a more spiritual persona. The title itself suggests this. In Buddhism nirvana is the state achieved by Buddha through meditation, signifying his ability to transcend suffering and karma (the effect of deeds in this life on one's rebirth in the next). According to Mori, her earlier work concentrated on social criticism, addressing issues of modern-day Japan. By contrast, *Nirvana* is not about people in urban settings, nor does it concern gender or other interpersonal issues directly. Rather, it takes the five elements of nature according to Buddhism—wind, fire, water, earth, and empty space—and creates a futuristic concept of nirvana. As Mori has said, "My interest is not just looking back to traditional ideas or



culture. I try to take in not only the present... I try to develop my own future vision and utopian ideas—my own interpretations of tradition.”

By questioning and stretching traditions—for example, by using a contemporary tool such as the computer to create her composite images—Mori tries “to bring something stable from the past and make it stable for the future.” She explores the beliefs of various civilizations (including Mayan, Egyptian, Greek, Indian, and Chinese as well as Japanese), seeking common cultural ideas that could apply to the future as much as to the past.

For Mori, the five fundamental elements of nature correspond to fundamental aspects of life, with no cut-and-dried separations among them. Thus, no single photograph in *Nirvana* correlates to one specific element; each contains multiple references.

In these images we see Mori in elaborate clothing of her own creation, informed by traditional Japanese dress. *Entropy of Love* (1996) incorporates images shot primarily in Arizona’s Painted Desert, although it also depicts a wind-power station in California and the dome of the Biosphere near Tucson. What Mori calls the “love shelter”—the acrylic bubble hovering in the foreground—appears to have arrived from another planet, enclosing the artist along with her sister. Photographs of

these various locations and objects are combined and manipulated on the computer to create a single photographic image, which is then blown up to billboard size and fixed between glass plates.

The title of *Pure Land* (1996–98) refers to a particular state of rebirth in the Buddhist cycle of reincarnation that ends in nirvana. Pure Land is the paradise achieved by the worship of the Amitabha (or Amida) Buddha, a paradise marked by its sensuous, pleasure-loving aspects.⁷ A well-known Chinese fresco rendition of Pure Land (Tang dynasty, second half of the eighth century) depicts a dancer with flowing scarves surrounded by court musicians playing various traditional instruments; similar images are also known

from Japanese temples. Mori’s interpretation casts the artist herself in the central role, surrounded by imaginary musicians playing ancient instruments that continue to be used in Japan today in both Shinto and Buddhist ceremonies. Mori’s musicians are a mix of cyborg and alien, stylistically informed by Japanese animated cartoon characters but fully a creation of the artist. *Pure Land* is set in the landscape of the Dead Sea, the lowest point on earth, called “dead” because the high salinity of its water cannot support any life. This salinity also calls to mind the salt used for purification in Shinto tradition. The protruding spit of sand at the bottom of *Pure Land* may refer to a primordial myth in which the sun goddess touched her spear into the water and at that point created the islands that form Japan. In the background is a floral or plantlike “glass palace,” which recalls the shape of Tibetan stupas. The lotus floating in the center of the image refers to the Buddhist belief that one is reborn in paradise out of a lotus.

Burning Desire (1996–98) was photographed at a spot in the Gobi Desert called Flaming Cleft, a particularly rugged point in the terrain where, according to Buddhist belief, a monk rested on his journey from China to India to acquire a holy text. The images of Mori engulfed in flame, wearing a traditional Tibetan monk’s hat and hovering above the desert floor, represent practitioners who are following the Buddhist path. The central figure, in the rainbow nimbus, shows Mori making the hand gestures and holding the attributes of the bodhisattva (a type of Buddhist deity) of compassion.

Mirror of Water (1996–98) was photographed in a French cave sculpted by water over millions of years. Mori wants to suggest that her own repeated self-portrait (a return in certain respects to her earlier cyborg persona) could develop and change over time due to its own *ki* (life force), much as the cave takes its endlessly changing shape from the water flowing through it. These multiple self-images are to be regarded as the same individual at eight different moments; the twins and triplets represent various aspects of this person at a given moment. What Mori calls the “UFO” in the



right half of the picture houses a variety of rooms, including an egg-shaped "tea ceremony room of the future." Once again Mori combines the traditional and the futuristic.

Shot, like *Pure Land*, in the awe-inspiring landscape of the Dead Sea, the 3-D video portion of the installation is also titled *Nirvana* and stars Mori in her elaborate dress inspired by a late-twelfth-century painted wood sculpture, well known in Japan, of the goddess Kichijōten. The original video footage was subsequently manipulated and combined with the same musician figures seen in *Pure Land*. In the video Mori holds a *hōju*, a jewel in the form of a lotus bud, frequently held by Buddha images. She performs a dance combined with mudra, the traditional hand positions often depicted in Buddhist art, which are employed to evoke particular states of mind. The video's soundtrack reinforces the notion of a passage through varying states of being that ends in pure whiteness.

The lotus-shaped *Enlightenment Capsule*, made of acrylic and lit by fiber-optic technology, refers to the lotus as a traditional symbol of purity and perfection that grows out of mud but is not defiled by it, just as Buddha is born into the world but lives above it. The lotus is also symbolic because its fruit is said to be ripe immediately when the lotus flower blooms, just as the truth preached by Buddha bears immediately the fruit of

enlightenment.⁹ In earlier work (including the *Beginning of the End* series), Mori herself lay down in variously shaped transparent body capsules—akin to the "love shelter" in *Entropy of Love*—which in their earlier context became coffinlike forms. In *Nirvana* both the "love shelter" and the *Enlightenment Capsule* become life-affirming forms.

Mori intends the *Nirvana* installation as a whole to create a meditative environment that provides the audience with a sense of tranquillity and transcendence. At the same time, however, the meditative and venerationary traditions of Japanese as well as other non-Western art and culture are brought into question by the artist's simultaneous acceptance of modern technology and mediated imagery. This dichotomous nature is typical of Mori's work; as she herself has commented, "I've always tried to say that things are two-sided. One side of the system is critical; the other is...celebration. Everything is validated...through images. People believe in this power—they are used to images being manipulated, and being manipulated themselves, by images."¹⁰

Carol S. Eliel
Curator
Modern and Contemporary Art

Checklist



Notes

1. Mori, quoted in Michael Corris, "British? Young? Invisible? w/ Attitude?" *Artforum* 30, no. 9 (May 1992): 111.

2. Mori, quoted in Dike Blair, "We've Got Twenty-five Years" (interview with Mariko Mori), *Purple Prose* (September 1995): 99.

3. Mori, quoted in Rieko Kumamoto, "Mariko Mori's 'Journey in Search of Self,'" in *Mariko Mori: Made in Japan*, exh. cat. (Tokyo: Shiseido Gallery, 1995), 4.

4. Robert Fouser, "Mariko Mori: Avatar of a Feminine God," *Art/Text* 60 (1998): 35.

5. Mori, telephone interview by author, February 24, 1998.

6. Ibid.

7. See Sherman E. Lee, *A History of Far Eastern Art*, 5th ed. (New York: Abrams, 1994), 182, for further discussion of the Pure Land school of Buddhism.

8. For a lengthier discussion of the lotus see C. A. S. Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism & Art Motives*, 3rd rev. ed. (New York: Dover, 1976), 255-8.

9. Mori, quoted in Blair, "We've Got Twenty-five Years," 99.

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Miko no inori, 1996
Video
29 min., 23 sec.
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by the Twentieth-Century Art Acquisition Fund and Ralph M. Parsons Fund

Mirage, 1997
Five digital video stills, formatted on glass panels
Video stills: each 17 x 23 in.
(43.2 x 58.4 cm); glass panels: each 24 x 30 in. (61 x 76.2 cm)
Courtesy Deitch Projects, New York

Burning Desire, 1996-98,
from *Nirvana*, 1996-98
Glass with photo interlayer
Five panels, each 120 x 48 in.
(304.8 x 121.9 cm); 120 x 240 in.
(304.8 x 609.6 cm) overall
Courtesy Deitch Projects, New York

Enlightenment Capsule, 1997-98,
from *Nirvana*, 1996-98
Acrylic
Diameter: 60 in. (152.4 cm)
Courtesy Deitch Projects, New York

Entropy of Love, 1996,
from *Nirvana*, 1996-98
Glass with photo interlayer
Five panels, each 120 x 48 in.
(304.8 x 121.9 cm); 120 x 240 in.
(304.8 x 609.6 cm) overall
Courtesy Deitch Projects, New York

Mirror of Water, 1996-98,
from *Nirvana*, 1996-98
Glass with photo interlayer
Five panels, each 120 x 48 in.
(304.8 x 121.9 cm); 120 x 240 in.
(304.8 x 609.6 cm) overall
Courtesy Deitch Projects, New York

Nirvana, 1997, from *Nirvana*, 1996-98
3-D video
7 minutes
Courtesy Deitch Projects, New York, and Gallery Koyanagi, Tokyo

Pure Land, 1996-98, from *Nirvana*, 1996-98
Glass with photo interlayer
Five panels, each 120 x 48 in.
(304.8 x 121.9 cm); 120 x 240 in.
(304.8 x 609.6 cm) overall
Courtesy Deitch Projects, New York